REPORT
LTA on Digital Youth Work
National strategies for digital youth work
Work Package 1

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1. Context of the work package within the framework of the LTA on Digital Youth Work

Council conclusions on Smart Youth Work (2017) and on Digital Youth Work (2019) both highlight the importance of strategic development of digital youth work: digitalisation should be embedded in national youth work strategies or other relevant policy plans with clear goals and concrete steps for developing and implementing digital youth work. Youth work and youth organisations should be encouraged to pursue these goals while developing their digital activities and services in accordance with their specific interests and needs. The Long-Term Activity (LTA) of the National Agencies of Erasmus+ Youth and European Solidarity Corps was set up as a means to take forward the past European work and help member states put the contents of the aforementioned council conclusions into practice.

The LTA uses the Digital youth work from the Council Conclusions on digital youth work (2019/C 414/02), which is as follows:

'Digital youth work' means proactively using or addressing digital media and technology in youth work. Digital media and technology can be either a tool, an activity or a content in youth work. Digital youth work is not a youth work method. Digital youth work can be included in any youth work setting, and it has the same goals as youth work in general. Digital youth work can happen in face-to-face situations as well as in online environments or in a mixture of the two. Digital youth work is underpinned by the same ethics, values and principles as youth work.

It is important to note at this stage that the LTA was started and this whole work package 1 carried out within the realities of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has had a major effect on the whole youth field. While the pandemic has given a surge of relevance to online activities and the associated youth work infrastructure, other aspects of both digital youth work and digitalisation have taken a back seat by necessity. While this work package has strived to keep the perspective to digitalisation in the youth field as wide as possible, some content can also be looked at with the pandemic context in mind.

The work packages in the LTA focus on different aspects of digital youth work. They are as follows, with the respective national agencies leading the work packages:
- WP1 – National strategies for digital youth work – Finland
- WP2 – Digital competences and digital capacity in youth work – Estonia
- WP3 – Enhancing young people ́s digital competences – Ireland
- WP4 – New practices for online youth work – Germany
- WP5 – Quality requirements for virtual and blended mobilities – Belgium Flanders

Each lead national agency is supported by an expert partner, which are:
- VERKE - the National Centre of Expertise for Digital Youth Work in Finland
- Estonian Education and Youth Authority – Harno
- National Youth Council of Ireland
- SALTO Training and Co-operation

- SALTO Inclusion and Diversity

In addition, SALTO PI will support the implementation of WP2 and WP3.

In total, 17 NAs and SALTO SEE (in addition to the SALTOs listed as expert/support partners) have committed to join the project.

2. Structure of work package 1

2.1 Background and goals

For the context of work package 1, the Council Conclusions on Digital Youth Work invite Member States to "promote and develop youth policies and strategies that strive to be proactive regarding technological development and digitalisation. When designing policies that affect young people's lives, the impact of digitalisation on societies, including youth work practices and services, should be taken into account and assessed."

The Council Conclusions continue in inviting the Member States to: "Include, where applicable, in their youth strategies or other relevant policy plans, clear goals and concrete steps for developing and implementing digital youth work and assessing its impact on young people and youth work. These goals should be based on knowledge, evidence and data regarding young people's digital competences, and the needs for youth work services".

Contrary to all the other work packages in the LTA in which participants are mainly from participating national agencies, work package 1 extended an invitation to representatives of their national authorities or other organisations responsible for creating national youth strategies. While a maximum number of 10 participating countries was initially set, 7 countries were eventually represented. The participating countries in the work package were Belgium (FL), Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Portugal and Romania.

The following questions were set to be at the core of the work package process:
- What can be learnt from other countries to make their own national digital youth work strategies even better, for example about the process of creating the strategy?
- What actions have and should be taken to make the strategies reality in youth work, for example how to promote innovation?
- What kind of kind of knowledge, evidence and data should the youth policy and youth work strategies be based on?
- How can the impact of the strategies be assessed?
- What kind of suggestions could be made for other countries in including digitalisation in their youth strategies?

The goals of the work package were set as follows:

1. The Partners have increased

- Their knowledge of existing strategies in European countries regarding digital youth work;
- their competencies in introducing and implementing digitalisation in strategic processes;
- their understanding of the relations/connections between societal changes and digitalisation;
- their resilience and foresight in relation to technological development in the future.

2. Learning and output produced in the work package benefit other countries / wider public.

3. Participants are empowered to collaborate both nationally and internationally during their strategic processes.

2.2 The structure of the work package

2.2.1 Pre-survey sent to participants

After confirming the participating countries and finalising the list of representatives from each country, the participants were asked to fill in an online survey to gauge the current state of digitalisation in their national strategies. The content of the questionnaire can be found in appendix 1.

2.2.2 First online meeting

The first meeting of the work package took place online in two parts on 24 and 28 May 2021. The aim of the first meeting was to go through the responses to the pre-survey and build a shared understanding of the situation regarding digitalisation in national youth strategies in participating countries.

The goal of the first meeting was also to enable participants to reflect together on the central challenges they have faced in developing their national youth strategies, the process of including digitalisation in them as well as the main challenges of implementing said strategies.

2.2.3 Consultations with national actors

In between the first and the second meeting, participants were tasked with consulting national actors. The objective here was twofold; firstly, to have an array of national digital youth work examples to highlight how digitalisation in youth strategies translates into practice, or – in case digitalisation is absent or lacking in national strategies – to show where links to digitalisation should have been strengthened. While a template for said consultation was provided (Appendix 2), participants were given freedom to consult national actors as they saw fit.

2.2.4   Second online meeting

The second and final online meeting was set to be held in September. Due to scheduling issues the meeting was moved to 19 October. Additionally participants were offered the chance to include their input via email in case they couldn't attend the online meeting. The goal of the second meeting was to look at the output of the national consultations and discuss the format of the output for the work package.

2.2.5   Dissemination event and third meeting

The output of the work package is set to be published and further plans made in the first dissemination event of the LTA on Digital youth work. The event is set to be held 16 to 18 March 2022. Because of covid-19 restrictions, the event was moved from a residential event to an online one in early 2022.

3.   Identified common challenges and priorities

The pre-survey as well as the initial discussions in the first meeting gave a picture of how the situation was in the participating countries. 2 of the 7 participating countries reported having a strong presence of digitalisation in their national strategies. 3 of the participants reported currently having some topics related to digitalisation present in their national strategies, while 2 were in the process of either renewing or creating national strategies, which were set to include points related to digitalisation as well.

The participants discussed in the first online meeting what they have found to be their central challenges for having digitalisation included more prominently in their national strategies. The identified challenges can be divided into three main categories.

3.1 Challenges related to the strategy/policy process

One of the central common challenges was related time in the nature of political processes as well as the scope of national strategies. Often the timeframe for drafting new strategies and policies is tight due to the negotiations for overarching government programmes, which of course need to be in place to guide the creation of a youth-specific strategy. Likewise, the evaluation of the effectiveness of previous programmes and policies has not always been available early enough in the process. On the other hand, creating a long-term strategy that is less vulnerable to changes in national politics often faces difficulty of setting the right size goals so that they are on an appropriate level.

Several participants identified a lack in capacity within the organisations responsible for developing national strategies regarding both digital youth work and digitalisation on a broader societal level. These capacities were related to competences of authorities creating

the policies as well as the knowledge regarding digitalisation present in the organisations on a broader level. It is difficult to include digital youth work aspects in national policies and strategies if the big picture of digitalisation is fuzzy or distorted. Some countries/governments are supported by an expert body specialized on digitalisation in the youth field, but these were not present in all participating countries.

Participants also highlighted the importance of a wider national digitalisation strategy. It is much easier to include digitalisation in a national youth strategy when drawing on a national digitalisation strategy is in place. A further complicating issue was the experienced difficulty in coordinating with other national strategies to avoid unnecessary overlap. This overlap can happen even if the country in question has a broader national strategy regarding digitalisation in place. These issues also affect involving stakeholders in the process of drafting new strategies since it is hard to agree on common strategic objectives between different stakeholders and stakeholder levels as well as balance short-term and long-term expectations for the strategies being developed.

3.2 Challenges related to the content of the national strategies/policies

One of the prominent identified challenges related to the content of the strategies was related to financial resources available to the youth sector. While the situation of available financing instruments available was varied between participants, most shared the challenge of lacking adequate funding for developing the IT infrastructure available to both the youth field and the young people benefiting from the national youth framework. The online shift in both the education and the youth field brought on by the pandemic has at least in some countries brought an increased utilisation of both national and EU funding instruments (i.e. national programmes to support IT investments in education or the next generation EU budget) for infrastructure development, though it remains to be seen how things develop after the pandemic is over.

Another prominent challenge was the lack in competences regarding digitalisation, evident in authorities as well as stakeholders involved in the process. It is vital to be able to pre-empt future developments as much as possible and understand the societal effects of digitalisation. It is challenging to formulate a viable long-term approach to the possibilities and challenges regarding digitalisation if the stakeholders in the process find it hard to respond to partially unknown future developments. Participants also highlighted the difficulty of creating a strategy that on a general level fosters a shared understanding of the potential of digitalisation in the field, and simultaneously supports innovation and experimentation with new emerging practice.

Several participants also identified a lack of unified national aims for digitalisation in terms of how it impacts young people's lives, well-being, and digital skills. While this seems to stem partially from the lack of broader national strategies, countries with said strategies in place do not seem to be immune to it either. The challenge of cross-sectoral cooperation and coordination is present in the content of national strategies as well as the process of creating them.

3.3 Challenges related to the implementation of the strategies

One of the main challenges in the implementation of national strategies related to digitalisation revolves around resources. Participants identified the lack of established, dedicated funding instruments for the youth field as a central issue. Even where there were national funding instruments for digitalisation in place and/or EU funding instruments were being utilised, there were still regional disparities in existing infrastructure or available funding. The challenges of cross-sectoral cooperation between stakeholders was also highlighted here, since cross-usage of IT infrastructure was often found lacking. While funding instruments certainly contribute to innovating and developing new youth work practice and the infrastructure to support said practice, it still eventually comes down to long-term funding to maintain the conditions for that youth work to continue in the long run.

The second major challenge to implementing strategies comes down to a shared understanding and agreement between stakeholders on both the content of the strategies and the process of implementing them. Lack of cooperation between stakeholders and actors in the field can lead to a fragmented approach and will further deteriorate the perceived amount of resources available. This also applies to human resources, since more shared practice and knowledge between actors and stakeholders was deemed necessary.

Finally, the participants highlighted the need for further development of knowledge and capacities in the field related to implementing digital strategies. This was evident in the rate of utilisation of available funding, as well as in how municipalities or other actors implementing digital youth work were not always aware or simply didn't have access to the support needed. This support can include national and international expert organisations as well as connections to organisations and actors outside the youth field with the expertise to implement digital approaches and solutions.

3.4 Prioritising goals in national strategies

In the first meeting the participants were also invited to join an exercise on prioritising goals for national youth strategies. They were invited to list the most important goals for national youth strategies and then prioritise them in the order of strategic importance. The participants were also asked to place goals on a grid based on whether they perceived the goal to have a strong or a weaker link to digitalisation. The resulting grid can be seen in appendix 3.

Overall, participants deemed youth inclusion and youth participation as both very high priority and strongly connected to digitalisation. Same was true for equal access to opportunities and increasing young people's future readiness. Finally, combating climate change and further development of digital infrastructure were also placed in this category.

One highlighted goal was placed in the category "high strategic priority" but "weak connection to digitalisation" by participants. This was "cross-sectoral cooperation", which was highlighted several times in different parts of the work package.

Some priorities deemed of lower priority were lobbying for and access to youth work, youth programmes tailored to young people's needs and gender barriers in youth employment. These were all also deemed to have a weak link to digitalisation in the strategies.

One last point of discussion in was the goal of enhancing youth mobility, both in general and within the European youth programmes. While this was placed in the mid-range in priorities, it was deemed to have a high link to digitalisation. However, participants were also very aware of the shifted priorities because of the Covid-19 pandemic, and it remains to be seen which way the priority shifts in the future. Certainly, the pandemic has highlighted and will no doubt continue to highlight new opportunities and approaches for young people to connect with online platforms. This aspect has also been further explored in work package 5 of this LTA.

4. Results of the consultations

We eventually received 8 examples of digital youth work practices, approaches or organisations from participants. Perhaps the most implicit connection between national youth work strategies and the digital youth work being highlighted was about financial resources. Several of the responses highlighted how funding was available for the practice in question only because the strategy in place had made it possible.

Another prominent theme present in the described practices was how having digitalisation present in national strategies made it possible to have long term strategic development of digital youth work practice and organisational support structures. This was seen as a result from having digitalisation as a clear topic in the strategies. One example also highlighted how the prominence of digitalisation in the national youth policy enables schools to include digitalisation as a high priority in developing the curriculum of youth work training. It was also seen as an asset in finding a focus for international project work.

What was found severely lacking across the mentioned practices / approaches was impact assessment of the practices in question or digital youth work in general. Indeed some of the descriptions even voiced the fact that assessing impact of digital youth work activities (as with youth work in general) is a difficult task.

Many practices seem to have highlighted weak points for strategic development of digital youth work, especially on the topics of practitioner competences and sharing of good practice. A main challenge in further developing and spreading the approach being highlighted was often a perceived lack of needed digital competences. Therefore a wider adoption of the approach would need to be linked to further capacity building of practitioners. Some examples also highlighted both the difficulty of finding other good practices to build on, as well as an uncertainty of how to share the practice they had developed. This seems to indicate a lack of networks both within the youth sector as well as

across sector lines. These networks could be used for both sharing new approaches as well as strengthening practitioner competences in mutual cooperation and/or learning.

As a question to be further explored, the results of the consultations sometimes seemed to have a disconnect between policy and practice. This might be because of the language used or the narrow scope of our compact survey, which might have given respondents an unclear picture of the level of strategies we were asking about. It might also be that there is indeed a disconnect between the policy level and where digital youth work is being implemented and innovated. This might be due to how stakeholders are (or aren't) involved in the policy process, or how the strategies are implemented on the field by youth organisations. Whatever the reason, it seems clear that more dialogue is needed on all levels of the policy process (drafting, writing, implementing, evaluating) so all stakeholders can be on the same page. Interestingly it also seemed that while national strategies weren't always explicitly mentioned, practices seemed to be fairly well in line with European strategic priorities, although this was only implied.

5. Recommendations for creating national youth strategies with a stronger link to digitalisation

1. **Ensure capacity building, expertise, knowledge and shared understanding related to digitalisation in all stakeholder levels** (authorities, youth and youth work organisations, practitioners and other stakeholders).

   Many youth policy documents lack foresight about the ways in which digitalisation will affect society, young people and youth work. Many strategies also lack a holistic approach to developing youth work in the digital era. Ensuring organizational capacities and stakeholder competences across the board is key in building a common ground for a shared policy process.

2. **Involve all relevant stakeholders in the process of creating new policy and support cooperation in the implementation phase.**

   Identify and include all relevant stakeholders in the process of creating or revising any national youth policy. Make sure that the language used in each part of the process is accessible to all stakeholders present (authorities, youth and youth work organisations, youth field practitioners, actors from other sectors) so they can take part equally. When needed, utilise expert organisations on digitalisation (including education, innovation, research and development fields and business sector) in facilitating and supporting the process. Be aware of the level of competences of participating stakeholders and ensure open dialogue on both short-term and long-term expectations related to digitalisation in the policies being co-created. Create the space and conditions for experimentation to develop digital tools and services in youth work, and to bring together youth work, youth research and the ICT sector in developing successful digital youth work practices and sharing experiences.

3. **Foster a broader national understanding of the impact of digitalisation, including both the benefits and risks.**

   Create better understanding of youth and youth work and support the quality of youth work and youth policy through more efficient use of data-driven developments and technologies for analysing data. Map and address the digital gap and inequalities to access the technological developments from the viewpoint of young people, youth workers and youth leaders and other stakeholders supporting youth. A national dialogue across sector lines and different stakeholders is required to build on this data and foster a stronger shared understanding of what digitalisation means in the youth field and beyond. Only with a balanced, shared understanding is it possible for organisations and stakeholders involved in both creating and implementing national youth policies to share objectives and goals across the board.

4. **Make sure digitalisation is represented in a balanced way in your national youth and youth work policies.**

   Goals should be based on knowledge, evidence and data regarding young people's digital competences, and the needs for youth work services. When including digital youth work in national policies, the European definition of digitality as a tool, content and activity in youth work should be used as a basis. Likewise, digitalisation of the youth field on a broader scale should look at infrastructure, the evolution of policy and practice as well as systemic change in the field. This balance should be evident in details as well, i.e., looking at strengthening young people's digital competences mainly from an employability perspective is simply insufficient. Rather, practitioners should be guided to look at a more complete picture of digitalisation and how it affects young people's lives. The aim should also be to develop and support understanding of the strong links between digitalisation and other societal megatrends, including globalisation, ageing and diversification of the population, changes in work life etc.

5. **Make the connections to European guidelines, policies and strategies on digitalisation evident for all stakeholders**

   For organisations it can sometimes be difficult to make the connections between European digitalisation strategies, national youth policies and organisational / practice development clear. When going through the process of including digitalisation in national policies, make sure to build shared understanding across the board of how European goals and approaches eventually translate into local practice in the field. It is our strong belief that this can also lead to a stronger link between national youth policy and digital youth work practice. For example, a useful framework for dialogue between stakeholders on digitalisation in a national youth field context could be the Council conclusions on digital youth work or the Council conclusions on Smart Youth Work.

6. **Make use of European, national and local organisations with digitalisation expertise in the process of creating and implementing national strategies.**

   Both pre-surveys to participants and consultations with practitioners indicated both a deficiency in in-house digitalisation expertise on different levels, as well as the need for specialised organisations especially when implementing new digital approaches. Authorities should be encouraged to use outside expertise if it is not present in their organisations while also providing resources for implementing organisations to use outside resources. Centralised procurement of supporting expertise on digitalisation should also be considered when practical.

7. **Foster and ensure cross-sectoral cooperation on all levels**

   Whenever possible, link digitalisation in youth strategies and policies with other similar policy content cross-sectorally. If policies are not clearly aiming at the same targets, it can lead to confusion on the implementing level. Ensuring connections and collaboration with other national actors creating policies enables better coordination of goals, responsibilities, funding, and shared resources. Similarly, youth organisations implementing strategies and digital youth work practice should be guided and supported to collaborate and build shared understanding across sectoral borders. This is especially true with the youth field and the formal education sector. Create the space and conditions for experimentation to develop digital tools and services in youth work, and to bring together youth work, youth research and the ICT sector in developing successful digital youth work practices and sharing experiences.

8. **Identify the need for and implement funding instruments regarding digitalisation in the youth field.**

   These national instruments can be geared toward infrastructure development, development of practitioner competences or digitalisation of the internal work of the youth sector itself. Funding instruments should also be targeted for innovating and implementing new digital practice, with the added recommendation that the upkeep of said practices after an initial funding period is also built into the process. These funding instruments can be specific to the youth field or cross-sectoral, which of the latter can also be utilised in strengthening cross-sectoral collaboration. Cooperation with the commercial sector can also be a viable avenue to increase available funding.

9. **Ensure proper and timely evaluation of new digital youth policy measures and digital youth work practice.**

   Many new digital youth work approaches are innovative and experimentational in nature. This is one of the best ways of developing new practice and responding to new developments. However, if evaluation and/or impact assessment are lacking, long-term development of these practices becomes more difficult. Youth policies and strategic funding instruments should include a support mechanism for evaluation whenever possible. Continuous internal evaluation of digitalisation-related youth

policies is also recommended since digitalisation tends to bring new developments and phenomena very quickly.

APPENDIX 1: Pre-survey sent to participants of WP1 before the first meeting.

1. **Digitalisation in national strategies**

   1.1 How has digitalisation and/or technological development been taken into account in your national youth strategies/youth policy documents?

   1.2 Do you have other relevant national strategies/policy documents that guide the digitalisation of youth work?

2. **Data-driven youth policy**

   2.1 What kind of data do you produce or use as part of your strategy work about the impact of digitalisation on young people, youth work and/or society?

   2.2 What kind of data do you produce or use as part of your strategy work regarding young people's digital competences and/or the need and focus for digital youth work services?

   2.3 How do you assess the impact of digital services and digital youth work activities?

3. **Cross-sectoral cooperation**

   3.1 What kind of cooperation do you have with relevant policy sectors (e.g. ICT sector, education sector) to further the digitalisation of youth work?

   3.2 What kind of cooperation do you have with research institutes and youth research in promoting data-driven youth policy on digitalisation?

4. **Support for policy implementation**

   4.1 How do you support the investment in digital infrastructure to youth work services to promote better access for all young people to said services?

   4.2 How do you support the youth sector in capacity building of practitioners?

   4.3 What kind of funding mechanisms have you created to support experimentation and the development of new digital approaches, tools and services in youth work?

Good practice description

This template is to help you gather the necessary information from your stakeholders / youth work actors. You are free to follow another structure as well, but the idea here is to help us gather information for us to process as well as refine to a useable output from our work package.

Any questions and clarifications from juha@verke.org .

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Main question: **What is an example of a Digital youth work practice, approach or actor where digitalisation in national youth strategies has played a part?**
(Or, if digitalisation is not clearly present yet in national youth strategies, where it would have helped?)

Keep in mind the work we have done so far: with the pre-questionnaire around **Digitalisation in youth strategies, Data-driven youth policy, Cross-sectoral cooperation and support for implementation.** How are these wiewpoints reflected in the implementation of the practice / approach in question?

1. Country	
2. Name of practice / approach /	
3. Who is doing the implementation?	
4. Main aspects of digital youth work practice or approach	
5. How has this practice benefited from digitality in the youth policy / strategy?	
6. Has this practice highlighted weak points or development needs	

in your youth policies regarding digitalisation?	

7. You previously highlighted in the Miro board key concepts regarding digitalisation in youth policies. Please highlight below how / if they are present in the practice in question.

7.1 Is the role of practitioners conceptualised in the good practice? How?	
7.2 Is there a community aspect to this practice? If so, what?	
7.3 What are the indicators to assess this practice? How are they used? Are they relevant?	

8. In the previous session you highlighted challenges to including a stronger viewpoint of digitalisation in youth policies, as well as the implementation thereof. Are these challenges somehow present in the practice in question? The challenges you highlighted include *lack of financial and other resources, access to relevant technology, challenges in assessment, short time frame between changing policy periods, staff competences and lack of cross-sectoral coordination between fields. Are these (or any other, please specify) challenges present in the practice and how have they been tackled?*

9. In the previous session you highlighted five key areas / elements that are both of *high strategic importance* and have a *high link to digitalisation*. These areas were *development of new digital infrastructure, combating climate change, youth participation / inclusion, access to opportunities* and *youth resilience*. Are these elements present in the practice, and if so, how?

10. Anything you wish to add?

APPENDIX 3: Result of prioritising exercise in the first meeting